

A Knock at the Door

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*We are born into darkness.
Little by little we begin to see the dawn.*

Words always fail to describe reality. Reality is a feeling—a long, drawn out, ever-changing feeling. And death is but a pause between dreams; a transition between the inhale and the exhale of a breath.

* * *

My name is irreLEVant. Let me begin last week; the day after the full moon; the day after I went for a walk with my great granddaughter. I had just awakened from a nap. There was a knock, a fragile rasp that reminded me of a dying fish's tail smacking, smacking against the dock.

I shuffled across the room. A second knock. "Coming!" I cried. The unfamiliar sound of my voice echoed.

I opened the door. Outside was an elderly man in a red cardigan and a yellow shirt. He wore thick glasses and rested half his weight on a cane. "Good to see you Lev." He smiled. "May I come in?" I stood aside, followed him to the kitchen table. We sat, stared at each other in silence.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He chuckled. "My name is Earl Taggart." In the depths of memory a spark ignited, carried me back to the last day of second grade. Earl and I walked to the bus, spoke of the summer ahead, of the year that was. Then he told me his parents had found a house in the

next town; that he would not be back in the fall. He was my best friend. I had not seen him since.

I felt the inviolability of time flex and saw Earl, the child, seated next to Earl, the old man. I saw too my own child self seated next to me. The four of us stared across decades.

"Earl?" I said finally. The past closed up. Through his glasses his eyes danced with laughter.

"A long time Lev." He said. "A long time." He reached beneath his sweater, pulled out a photograph. It was us. He held a baseball. I held a bat. The photo was faded. "1941." He said. The words hung in the air, fell softly on the table.

"Why now?" I asked.

"You're going on a journey." He said with finality. Silence swam around us, caressed the contours of my being. Ages passed. Or a moment. Earl rose from the table, walked to the door. I followed.

Outside, the hall was empty. Thick doors shut out other lives; those I had coexisted close beside for years and years but never truly known. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Earl had walked ahead.

"I thought lately," he said when I drew near, "what my obituary will say; how my life will be summed in a paragraph." We continued in silence. The end of the hall seemed very far away. "What we feel never

lingers.” He continued. “The present sense of life we each exist within—that cannot be remembered. That cannot be passed on.”

* * *

I had passed through the door at the end of the hall. Earl had vanished. The corridor was gone. In a field of ankle-high grass I stood face to face with the eight year old version of myself. The sky was cloudless, the horizon ringed with trees.

A kitten appeared, an orange tabby beast, short haired and thin. It walked between us, mewed. My child self picked it up, held it close. The kitten began to purr, quiet at first, then louder, louder. The vibrations pulsed through me; so loud the waves of sound knocked me from my feet—falling, drowning in the miles of space between my mind and the grass beneath.

Everything was blue as I fell. The emptiness of daytime. The overabundance of light which hides the infinity of space. I fell for days.

I did not think, only felt. The lingering purrs became lost in the rhythm of my heartbeat. The outlines of my skin dissolved. I flowed beyond myself, danced as if a breeze, as if I was a dandelion being torn apart, dispersed.

I caught myself.

My child self held me in his hand, ran through the field laughing, chased madly by the kitten, now grown up, now a tiger.

Dandelion seeds filled the sky, rained over us. The tiger pounced, tackled my child self. I flew through the air, landed on the tiger's neck. The beast raced on, faster, faster. The world was a blur of blue and green and white. He ran on. He roared.

The sound shattered everything. The world cracked and crashed into nothingness. Everything was black.

The tiger ran on.

At length we stopped beneath a large oak tree. The tiger sat motionless. I slid down its back, stood on emptiness. In the gnarled trunk was a smooth white door.

"Enter." The tiger said softly. The voice was Earl's. He closed his eyes, appeared to sleep. I walked forward, hesitated, looked back. The tiger had become a kitten again. It ambled towards a distant point of light.

I turned to the door, opened it, entered.

Within, light was absent. I felt nothing. It was hard to tell whether I existed; whether I was anything beyond the breath which slowly came and went. Then a warm tingling, as if I ceased to be; as if the billions of atoms that once formed me had separated.

I was brought back to myself by the scent of intimacy; a mix of pheromones, of skin, hair; a million unknown wordless things that make the scent of another person, once known, always known. It had been fifty years since I held her close, but without doubt, it was my first wife, Angeline.

The smell was powerful; so close I should have felt her skin; should have been able to taste her breath. I reached out, touched nothing. Yet, the sensation lingered, intensified. Her presence wrapped around me, enveloped my existence.

"Lev." Angeline's voice circled, passed through me, trembled in my body. It was a whisper, like she used to say to wake me on Saturday mornings. I felt her kiss; reached out again. Nothing. "Wake up." Her voice said. I opened my eyes. Darkness still. "Wake up." She said again. I opened my eyes. Darkness still. But a wind had risen, and it drove away her presence. I opened my eyes a third time; in the distance a small point of light.

"Wake up." She called a third time, faintly now. I strode toward the light. The memory of Angeline faded, and by the time I reached a second door of pure white, I had forgotten her. Then, on a breeze, her scent returned. I savored it.

Through the door I found myself on a raft. Unbroken ocean stretched in every direction. The world was without change for an eternity. I was cat-like, drifting in and out of sleep, staring blankly into the void. I wrote words in my mind, lived entire imaginary lives and relived the days of my existence detail by detail. I recalled the taste of an apricot, the feel of silk, the sound and scent of fallen leaves piled beside a tree, rustling beneath my footsteps.

Then the doldrums broke. In the distance the fluke of a humpback whale rose above the sea, crashed down, resonated. The giant creature bellowed; the deep notes echoed against themselves, rippled the waves into a storm of whitecaps. The raft shuddered, bent itself in strange angles; rose up, fell down, submerged beneath swell after swell until I was ripped from its comforting sameness.

I sank into the water, down into a dark, dark place surrounded by the feeling of death. The whale's song was beautiful. It spoke of something beyond my comprehension, but still, like a prayer, it lifted me up, directed my eyes to a point of light. I swam towards it, surfaced.

High clouds meandered, shifted shapes overhead. I sat on an iceberg floating on the same empty, endless waves. To my right sat a polar bear. To my left paced a penguin. I watched them and wondered where I had arrived at, what it meant. It was as if the

entire world stretched beneath me, the poles condensed to an icy disc.

In my mind's eye billions of minute creatures filled the space between the beasts, built cities, raised crops, littered the world with relics of themselves. I felt like a god; too distant to know or care about the beings shifting like sands beneath my feet.

"You are far from a god." The penguin and bear spoke in unison. The vision vanished. There was only the empty sea.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"A mirage." Said the penguin.

"A metaphor." Said the bear.

"You are to be judged," spoke the bird, "on your life."

"Defend yourself." The bear said with finality. I was at a loss for words.

"I was a father." I began, paused. "I have tried to be good." My thoughts wandered to the uncomfortable realm of relativism; the scope and scale of a human life in terms of the universe and eternity. "By what law, what determination, am I to be judged?"

"The Law." The penguin answered. This did not help. I had spent an entire life losing faith in any such ethic; an entire life seeing day by day a myriad

of individuals operating by unique passions and beliefs. I was lost. I remained silent. The penguin continued to pace. The bear sat still and stared toward a distant place.

A streak of color appeared in the ice, a swirling rainbow of light and beauty. Slowly it danced, rose in the air, gradually taking the ghostly form of a child; dispersing, coming back together, solidifying into a young girl with eyes green against a skin of white. Her hair was blonde, her clothes the softest blue, as if she wore the sky. She bowed her head and glanced at each of us. Then she spoke with the soft voice of innocence.

"I saw two men," she said, "yell at one another, words so cruel, vagrant. Their eyes raged, and then one man hit the other so hard blood flowed from his cheek onto the ground. In the pool of blood the two men wrestled, clawed at each other, cursed and decried life." The child paused, glanced once more at each of us, continued. "From the moment of my birth, I have been taught such things are terrible and wrong. But they happen, day by day."

In the child's eyes were soft tears which fell with silence to the ice. She looked at the three of us a third time, bowed her head once more, and then began to age, first into a beautiful woman, then into an elder, her back bent as if with years of strain, a lifetime of tears, and the gradual loss of faith in humanity. And then she was gone.

Behind the bear an old man appeared dressed in robes of an ancient time. He spoke in foreign words and laughed loudly, pacing back and forth with great excitement. He pointed at the ocean, swept his arms wide above his head to encompass the sky, then pointed at me and broke into a fresh bout of laughter. Then, as before the young girl had aged, the ancient man became a boy. He ran to the polar bear and leapt on its back. The bear rose, raced wildly about the berg; stopped suddenly in front of me. "Why do you not run?" The bear and the boy said in unison.

So I ran, lost myself in the most peculiar race, while to our side the penguin continued his stoic pace, back and forth, back and forth. We ran free, laughing madly, until the bear tripped, and we three tumbled in a pile across the penguin's path. Then a gunshot.

I sat upright and discovered a new man, scowling as a trickle of smoke dissipated from a shotgun clutched lovingly in his hands. I turned my head and found the penguin dead, blood streaming, turning the entire iceberg a deathly red.

I wept; deep unsatisfying tears which glistened on my cheeks and left a scent of salt upon the world. The hunter laughed. The boy had disappeared, while the polar bear rose slowly to its feet and walked to the bleeding corpse. It took the penguin in its mouth, tread to the iceberg's edge, and dropped the bird into the water. A brief ripple, and then it was gone.

“What have you learned?” The bear asked. Then a crackling sound and we began to drift apart as the iceberg became two.

The bear’s last question echoed in my mind. What had I learned? Indeed, it seemed asked about my entire life; these countless days tossed about, changing, growing old, wondering, always wondering, how to live. How do you sum up a life? How do you state what you have gained by living?

* * *

I was cast off by the red ice, struggled to remain afloat. Then something changed. I rose into the sky, flew unhindered above tranquil seas, grew aware of the energy within myself; the pulsing life of unmet potential. The burning need to create filled me, rent open unknown channels of inspiration, of power to turn thought and dream into reality.

I raised an island from the sea, small at first, growing; an empty place of rock and dirt. Waves crashed on new land, faster, faster; created sandy beaches and wore caves in cliffs. I raised a tree on a hilltop, then a second; a dozen, a forest of oaks and firs and palms and thousands of other species. My mind flashed with details, my hands pulsed with direction, moved beyond themselves in the realm of light, placing here a bush, there a fern, a flower or a fruit tree. Then a lamb, a lion, a lizard, a manatee; animals of all sizes, down to the ants and centipedes.

I floated to the island, set foot in a glen by a stream; filled it with fish. I knelt in the grass, gazed into the soil beneath; placed a billion microbes, a billion entities unknown to me. It should have been overwhelming, but the radiance I felt within myself transcended the existence I had known and even the furthest heights of my dreams. I was creation, and it was good.

When it was finished, I walked to the ocean and sat on the beach. A few yards off a seal sunned itself on a rock, and the trees behind me were filled with the songs of a hundred birds. I smiled, considered it, wondered at the altered perception of time, of how far I had come since I left Earl in the hallway.

Suddenly, a dog sat beside me. I looked at her, found recognition. "Ajna?" I asked. She nuzzled under my arm and licked my chin. Her tail beat a happy rhythm in the sand, and I held her close, smiled, remembered.

* * *

Angeline left when I was thirty-two. I sunk into depression, drank, slept for hours and hours trying to forget, trying to readjust. I took long meandering walks in the evenings and all day hikes on the weekends, when the loneliness set in deep.

One Sunday morning I ambled along a well-worn forest path. I heard a whimper, soft, like a ghost. I paused, listened, thought I had imagined it; prepared

to move on. Then the sound repeated, lingered in a bush a few yards up the hillside. In the shadows I saw a puppy, a skinny disheveled little beast; a motionless fluff of gold, white and black fur. I crept close, cradled the pup in my arms; felt the faintest heartbeat against my skin. She was unconscious, dying of thirst and starvation. I wept as I carried her back to the car; would weep often the next few days as she hovered between life and death. And I have seldom felt such warmth in life as when she opened her eyes and licked my hand, or when she finally gained her strength enough to stand.

She was my first dog since I was ten and would share my life for the next fifteen years until she slipped behind the gaze of death. Thinking back on her life, the moments I remembered most were the simplest sort. The feel of her paw in my hand. The excitement in her eyes when I took the leash from its hook. The peace on her face while she napped in the sun.

We had great times, adventures too, but who she was, just like Angeline, had become a blur of senses; the memory of my fingertips running along her back, the smell of her fur, warm, in the sunlight; the sound of her sigh in the middle of a dream—the little experiences crafted in the day by day act of living so close together.

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On the beach we played fetch with a stick Ajna brought from the woods. Over and over she leapt after it, splashing through the shallows, returning to drop it at my feet. Her eyes sparkled with the zeal of play. I laughed and remembered our youth, wondered if this Ajna recalled our first hike or when she escaped the yard and was gone for two days before turning up on the porch caked in dried mud, a tired smile on her face.

In time, we rested; sat close. Then, for the first time in ages, the sun began to set. A swath of colors filled the sea, and the sun, giant, came to rest half-set upon the horizon. A door opened in the sun, and Ajna led me forward along a path of sunlight.

At the door, Ajna stopped, motioned with her head for me to enter. I knelt beside her, placed my hand on her shoulder and said goodbye. She wagged her tail, licked my hand, then turned and trotted back to the island. I entered the sun.

I found myself in the lobby of a movie theater. Earl stood behind the concession counter. We were alone. "Hello Lev." He said cheerfully. "How have you been?" He chuckled, turned to the popcorn machine and filled two tubs. He handed me one. "Soda?" Without waiting for an answer, he filled two cups. "Follow me."

We walked down the corridor, entered a theater marked with the infinity symbol. Inside, it was empty, with the house lights up and the screen blank. Earl chose a row and walked to the middle. I sat beside him. We were silent, munching on small handfuls of popcorn.

"What does this all mean?" I asked at last.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?"

"A dream?"

"No, but kind of like that." He took a sip of soda, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Tell me," he said, "looking back, what was the greatest moment of your life?"

The polar bear's last question rose in the back of my mind; what had I learned? Earl's question felt linked, equally unanswerable.

"Based on what?" I asked.

"Your own sense of things."

"I remember running," I began, the words a surprise to myself, "laughing. Feeling loved and happy, ever so happy. I was a child. It was sunny. My mother and father were there, laughing too. And Sophie, the dog of my youth. We were all running in the sunshine, all laughing, all happy; free from everything beyond that instant."

Remembering, I wept; tried to imagine an entire life lived in such a state. I could not but sensed that it would be timeless.

"I do not know," I said after a while, "if that was the greatest moment of my life. But times like that, though never as frequent as it seems they could have been, I truly believe gave more meaning to my existence than anything else."

"Was laughter the key?" Earl asked.

"No." I said after reflection. "It was something else, something hard to define. Purity, perhaps, or the complete unification of feeling, action, thought. Something like that. I have felt it in many forms. Laughing as a child was but one."

"What was another?"

"I remember lying in bed with Maria, my second wife. We held each other close, our bodies naked, warm against each other. We stared into each other's eyes, let go of everything else. I could feel her heartbeat. It pulsed in unison with my own. All the emotion of our love for each other rose, swirled; surrounded us in a cocoon. Time lost meaning. The day to day life we led vanished. We were pure feeling, but more than that, we were pure shared feeling. When the moment passed, as it always does, we stared wide eyed at one another, wordless, in awe."

"Your parents, your dog, your wife... these experiences are always shared?"

"Sometimes, yes, but not always. Not long ago, I felt it while I strolled in the park. Many times throughout my life it occurred while I was alone, including the most intense." My mind's eye drifted. Earl was silent, waiting.

"It was during the war in Korea," I continued, "after a battle. I had killed a man that day; saw his death, saw his body lay motionless hour after hour while the battle continued. In the pauses I looked at him, tried and tried to imagine his life. But I could not. I did not know how people in Korea lived, could not conjure the village or city he would have been raised in; the face of his mother and father, the sound of his voice. It was too much. He just lay there, motionless."

I looked at Earl. He was listening, but by his eyes, I could tell he was also remembering. Everyone has moments that stand out. The older you get, the more the most pronounced linger.

"After the battle," I resumed, "after we lost, I had an hour to myself. I wandered from camp, up a small hillside covered by the last snows of winter. Pine trees dotted the way, and I saw a black squirrel with long fuzzy ears. I followed it, found myself at a small graveyard; a handful of old family tombs, abandoned like the village where we had made our camp.

"It was quiet, except the retreating footsteps of the squirrel and an occasional burst of gunfire in the distance. I sat in the snow between the graves and fell into a meditative state. Thoughts of life and death absorbed me: considerations of the bones and ashes beneath my feet; the existence those distant individuals lived, how they might have died and how little was left behind. And I thought of the man I had killed, the friends whom died; my own mortality. Then I began to laugh. I do not know why at first, but it overwhelmed me. I laughed and laughed, forgot everything; was only laughter. When it finished, I felt refreshed. A beam of sunlight enveloped me, and in my mind's eye, I drifted with that light, a thousand miles, a thousand directions. The temporal life I lived day by day vanished. And for a time I was pure feeling, pulsing with the sunlight, borrowing memories from the dead souls around me."

I stopped speaking. There was more, but the rest was beyond words. After an hour in the snow I wandered back to the war. Everything had changed in my perception, and in the months that followed, no matter the sufferings of my body, I had in the memory of that moment an unending fount of warmth that sustained my spirit and distanced my existence from the woes that swam around me.

* * *

The lights dimmed to black. Silence. Then the sound of a heartbeat; two heartbeats. The muffled sounds

of voices; the swishing of fluids. Screaming. Motion. Hints of light, here now lost, then a burst of light, large faces, machines, wandering sights seen through eyes unused to seeing. My eyes. My birth. I knew. I remembered.

The scenes shifted quickly. Always through my eyes. Always things I had forgotten but recognized. In a dark room a mobile of plastic sheep rotated above me. A neighborhood passed at the awkward slant of a stroller seat. My mother's voice, my father's sparkling blue eyes. The dog licking my face while I lay on the ground unable to move, flailing my hands in the air, my head rocking idly from side to side, gaining bit by bit the first reckoning of life.

From infancy to childhood the film progressed, then the faces began. Tens of thousands of faces; people I had met, some I had known well, others fleeting images that filled the background of my life. Everything, I understood, had been stored; every moment of life witnessed, felt, misunderstood. It was all there.

Then the parade of faces ground to a halt. And there was only one. Maria. For forty-three years my companion. The memories flowed by. The day we met. The first time we kissed, made love; so many firsts and then the pleasure of growing close moment after moment, year after year. The screen captured it all.

A Sunday afternoon. We lay naked in each other's arms dozing, a slight breeze through the curtains. A hint of sunlight. Music played, gentle, soothing. My eyes flickered open, rested on her face. Memory filled in the sense of touch, her scent; all the things the film could not represent.

Maria's eyes opened. She smiled. "I dreamed," she said, "we had a daughter." In the background the music stopped, the record at an end. "She was beautiful." I placed my hand on her stomach. "She will be beautiful."

Later, I looked down with eyes aglow on our first child, our daughter Anne. Asleep, she flexed her little hand, gripped my pinky. In the theater, I could feel her touch, the sensation of awe. I remember holding her all night while Maria slept, awash with new feelings, new hopes, fears. But mostly, I remember being happy, so very happy.

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A day at the beach played on the screen. I built a sand castle with my son and daughter. She was three. He was not yet two. Maria waded in the nearby waves, looked back at us now and then, smiled.

It suddenly became unbearable, watching my life pass across the screen. Those moments; that was it. They existed once. Only once.

"Turn it off." I said. It seemed years had passed. "Am I to relive my entire life?" The screen flickered. A hospital bed. A sheet drawn over Maria's lifeless body. It was two days before Christmas; a year and a half before Earl knocked on my door.

We said goodbye a hundred times as her health declined, but when she finally died, I was asleep. On screen, I pulled back the sheet, gazed at her face.

In death, she was a stranger; like all of us, alone in her journey, the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that made up her existence locked forever beyond her motionless eyelids. She seemed so much smaller once the life was gone; so very, very old, as I realized then my own reflection had also grown.

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The screen went black. I reached out to Earl, but he was gone. The seats were gone. The theater was gone. Everything was emptiness.

Then the sound of moving water, faint at first, then louder, followed by a rocking motion. Luminescence. Stars, galaxies, both distant and close, filled the space around me.

I sat in a small boat floating on a river of golden light. Ethereal notes sounded in the eddies, created ripples and whirlpools of beauty. From time to time small streams branched from the river and drifted into the distance.

At times the waters rushed, glowed bright, and within I felt, nearly overwhelming, a deep love of everything; of life, of time, of the endless possibilities, shapes and forms that make up existence. At other times the waters slowed to a crawl, almost as if the river had begun to flow in the opposite direction. I was burdened by a sense of doubt, of pointlessness. The glory of the rapids became so distant, almost forgotten; a dream.

Then, for a moment; just the briefest of times, I could truly see.

The river extended without end in every direction, and as I journeyed along my narrow route, so too did countless others, each in their own boat, moving forward, backward, slowing, rushing, spinning—an infinite fleet of souls in motion, unaware, unable to reach out to those floating so close beside.

The vision vanished. I was alone, floating along my own path, seeking my own end.

* * *

At length my boat drifted into a stream. I flowed at a slow, meandering pace. Then, in the distance, a knock; familiar, reminiscent. The sound repeated, and I felt the most terrific pain in my chest; heard the sound of my own lips stammering unintelligible cries for help. I opened my eyes to my apartment, my fist clenched to my heart as it convulsed a third time.

As I die, I realize I have fallen so a sunbeam from the window shines across my face, warms me. Then there is a shift. I cease to be the elderly man dying alone on the floor. I cease to be who I always thought I was.